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Tale of a Double Agent

Fedora. For twenty years that was the jaunty code name for the FBI's favorite spy—a Soviet double agent, working for the United Nations in New York, whose tales so titillated J. Edgar Hoover that he often passed them directly to the White House. Consequently, Fedora's reports became an important part of several domestic dramas: the hurried investigation of John F. Kennedy's assassination, the Pentagon-papers controversy, Richard Nixon's creation of an extralegal "plumbers" unit that ultimately led to Watergate—and a bitter controversy within the U.S. intelligence community over the possibility of a high-level traitor, or "mole," in its midst. But some intelligence specialists always had doubts about Fedora, and last week the doubters got their sweetest vindication yet. The FBI, it was disclosed, now believes that Fedora was really loyal to Moscow all along, a sinister source of "disinformation."

The bureau's about-face on Fedora, reported in the October issue of Reader's Digest, was confirmed by intelligence sources last week. Coincidentally, NEWSWEEK learned that a forthcoming book about the FBI by David J. Garrow identifies Fedora for the first time as Victor Lessiovski, a longtime Soviet employee of the United Nations.* Both United States and U.N. officials said that Lessiovski was widely known as an agent for Soviet intelligence, the KGB, and circumstantial evidence suggested that he also could have been the spy who duped the FBI. But bureau sources would not confirm that Lessiovski was Fedora, and United Nations officials reported that the Russian had retired in June and returned to Moscow, which left the matter only slightly less mysterious than before. One thing, however, was clear: whatever Fedora's real identity, the reappraisal of his role raised embarrassing questions about the policies and decisions in which his information was involved.

'Fancy Circles': Lessiovski was a short, plumpish man with a pointy nose and a pet poodle that he walked promptly at 11 o'clock every night on his way to buy the first edition of The New York Times. "He could be pleasant if forced into a conversation," said one former colleague at the U.N., "but he was not what one would consider a jolly soul." Lessiovski arrived in New York during the early 1960s from diplomatic posts in Burma, Thailand and Australia to work for the U.N. Secretary-General. Mostly, he shuffled papers and made lists. But with an annual salary of about $70,000, he and his stylish wife seemed to move "in fancy circles," a U.N. official said. Lessiovski occasionally boasted about knowing celebrities like Jacqueline Kennedy. Some former acquaintances recall Lessiovski's directing them to a 1958 novel, "The Ugly American," and its thinly disguised description of the mastermind for Soviet operations in Burma: "It was a man named Victor Lassiovsky. He had some minor title—I believe it was second secretary—[but] he was the real tactical leader . . ."

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Lessiovski in 1979: Was he the FBI's man—or the Kremlin's?

As it happened, the double agent called Fedora also first appeared in the early 1960s. He approached the FBI just weeks after the defection of a high-ranking KGB officer named Anatoli Golitsin, who carried dire tales about Soviet penetration of almost every Western government, including the United States. Golitsin also predicted that the Kremlin would soon send out disinformation specialists to contradict his warnings—precisely what was done by Fedora and several other supposedly disaffected KGB agents who suddenly turned up. In particular, Fedora confirmed the credentials of Yuri Nosenko, another surprise defector. Nosenko had any contact with assassin Lee Harvey Oswald—a somewhat incredible proposition since Oswald had earlier defected to the Soviet Union after serving as a marine at an air base for top-secret U-2 spy planes. After years of interrogation by the CIA, Nosenko clung to the claim about Oswald but admitted that he had lied about some of his own credentials—including those that Fedora had confirmed. Yet both men continued to enjoy the confidence of the highest FBI and CIA officials.

Break-in: That confidence may have set the stage for Watergate. In 1971, as former military analyst Daniel Ellsberg was slipping reporters copies of the Pentagon papers, Fedora reported that a set of the secret documents was also delivered to Soviet officials. This information gave Nixon national-security grounds to form the plumbers group that illegally broke into the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist. The break-in and the existence of Fedora himself were among the secrets that some Nixon men claimed they had to hide in the Watergate cover-up.

By 1978 the FBI had begun to sour on their Soviet counterspy at the U.N. The CIA, however, continued to credit Nosenko and, by extension, Fedora. Author Garrow says he learned the double agent's real name from the author Ladislas Farago, who got it from former top FBI official William C. Sullivan—who believed Fedora to be a fraud. Both men are now dead. Relations between the bureau and the Russian grew so frosty that FBI agents asked author Garrow to find out if Lessiovski planned to return home after his U.N. tour. "I got the impression that they thought this would be the acid test," said Garrow. Had Lessiovski stayed, it would have demonstrated his loyalty to the United States. His departure suggests the opposite, and leaves intelligence experts wondering about the full extent of damage done by his reports over the years.

Hoover: Titillated

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*In his book "The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.," to be published this month by W.W. Norton & Co., author Garrow identifies F

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